August 2008

Depot Town Rag

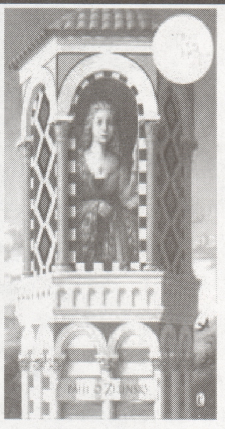
Volume 23, Number 6

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

Oh, that towering feeling....

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

Oh, oh! It's Heritage Festival time again!



Rapunzel, Rapunzel, All golden and fair, Come down from your tower; Let's go to the fair!

It's Yester-Fester time again, and some have suggested that, after 30 years of this historical hoopla, we ought to erect some kind of significant monument to our community's history. We could make history by recognizing it, they contend.

Others say that Ypsilanti has plenty of such edifices—we have just become accustomed to them and forgot they were here. This issue of *The Rag* reviews some monumental examples and looks up to a few of our more up-standing hometown contenders.

Local monument

In Ypsi, just parking the family car in front of the house can be monumental––if your family name is "Tucker." Terry Lobzun, public relations specialist for RM Auctions, Inc., brought this 1948 Tucker to the Tucker home in June.

Freighthouse update

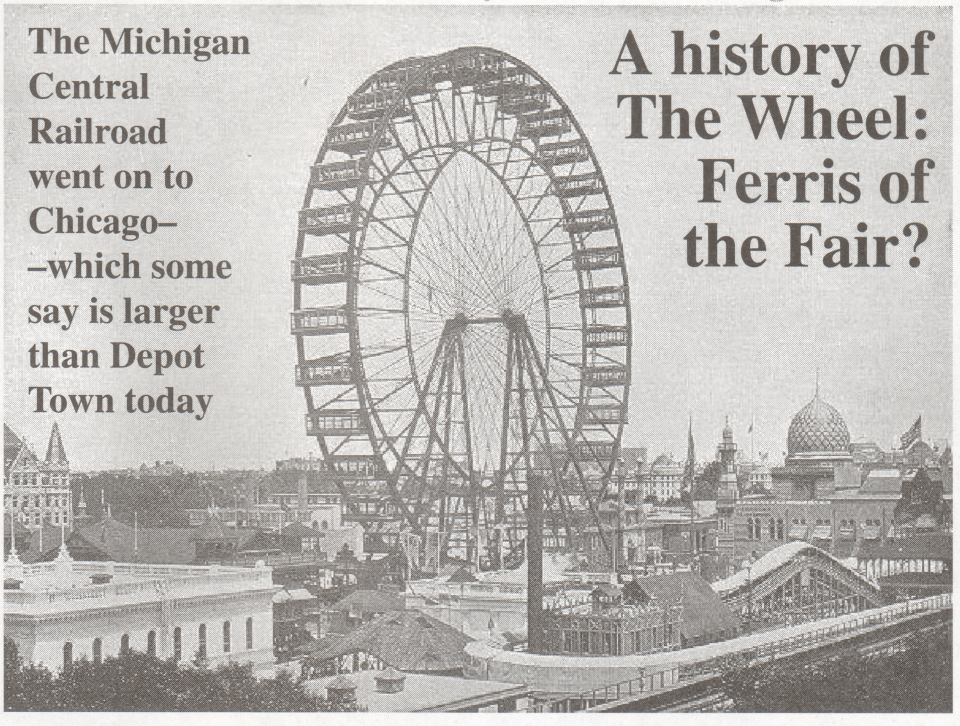
Friends of the Ypsilanti Freighthouse announced in July that, with State Historic Preservation Office support, the first critical repairs on the Freighthouse will begin in "late summer, early fall."

"Our efforts are redoubled," say co-chairs Nat Edmunds and Bonnie Penet, "to strengthen partnerships—as well as to make new corporate friends who will help us restore and reopen the Freighthouse and expand programming and maintain it for future generations."

As we prepare for another annual Ypsilanti Heritage Fest centering on our historic Depot Town neighborhood, we reflect upon giant attractions that introduced hundreds of thousands to our community's cultural heritage

A history of The Wheel: Ferris of the Fair?

The Michigan Central Railroad went on to Chicago––which some say is larger than Depot Town today



G.W.G. Ferris's first wheel had Ypsilanti connections

First Ferris Wheel highlighted the Fair

-James Mann

Today it is hard to imagine a carnival or country fair without a Ferris wheel, but this indispensable object of entertainment is just over one hundred years old. The Ferris Wheel is the result of American genius and modern technology. It is called the Ferris Wheel because it was invented by George Washington Gale Ferris.

Ferris was born at Galesburg, Illinois and was five years old when his family moved west to Nevada in 1864. The family settled on a ranch near Minden, Nevada. Near the ranch was the Cradlebaugh Bridge with a large undershot water wheel which may have been the inspiration for what would later be known as the Ferris Wheel.

He left home in 1875 to attend the California Military Academy in Oakland. In 1880 he graduated from the Rensselear Polytechnic School in Troy, New York with a degree in civil engineering. He moved to New York where he began a career designing bridges, tunnels and trestles throughout the industrial northeast and Midwest.

Ferris attended a banquet in Chicago in 1891 where he heard Daniel H. Burnham, director of works for the coming Chicago Worlds Fair, challenge the engineers to produce something to rival the Eiffel Tower, the major attraction of the 1889 Paris International Exposition. A demand had been made on Burnham from 25 of the leading American engineers that any tower built at the Chicago Fair had to be the result of "American genius."

Ferris was inspired and drew up plans for a wheel 825 feet in circumference rotating on a 45-foot axle 82 inches in diameter and weighing 56 tons. *[continued overleaf]*

Historic and MONU-MENTAL Ypsilanti

Ferris's *(continued from page one]*

The towers supporting the wheel were 144 feet high, anchored in 30 feet of concrete. The wheel rose 266 feet and carried 36 cars. Each car was 13 feet wide and could carry a total of 2,160 riders at a time.

There were those who laughed at Ferris and some even said he was crazy; others suggested he had wheels in his head. Ferris ignored the comments because he understood the strength of steel. The components of the wheel were wrought at nine steel mills in Detroit and loaded onto 150 train cars for shipment to Chicago. The trains carrying the components passed through Ypsilanti on the Michigan Central Railroad. *[See sidebar at right]*

The wheel opened on June 21, 1893, elevating its riders the equivalent of 26 stories above the ground and providing them with a view that included scenery in three states.

A few days before the official opening of the wheel, a newspaper reporter rode the wheel with Ferris and his wife Margaret Ann and recounted the ride in the purple prose typical of the day: "As the mad storm swept round the cars, the blast was deafening. It screamed through the thin spider-like girders and shook the windows with savage fury. It was a place to try a man's nerves. The inventor had faith in his wheel; Mrs. Ferris in her husband. But the reporter at that moment believed neither in God nor man."

After the fair closed, smaller wheels were set up at amusement parks across the country, but with little gain to George Ferris. He became obsessed with plans to build bigger and better wheels, but there were no takers and the plans were a drain on his funds. His wife left him in 1896 as Ferris slid further into a deep depression. He died on the night of November 21, 1896, in Pittsburgh's Mercy Hospital. Ferris was alone when he passed away. George W. G. Ferris was 37 years of age when he died.

Michigan Firehouse Museum tower (Old Firehall) was orignally used for hanging fire hoses up to dry. The campanile style brings even more Italian architectural history to compliment many of the Commericial Italianate buildings in Depot Town and downtown

Cross Street Village (Old Ypsi High) enjoys a Colonial Revival style tower in the tradition of Philadephia's Independence Hall. There's a second one up the hill on top of EMU's Roosevelt Hall

Big Wheel made connections through Ypsi

In 1893, Ferris's main worry in constructing his first wheel was whether he could acquire enough steel to build his machine. He realized, however, that he had an advantage over others trying to find such resources. With his experience in steel-inspection he knew most of the nation's steel executives and the products they made.

"No one shop could begin to do all the work, therefore contracts were let to a dozen different firms, each being chosen because of some peculiar fitness for the work entrusted to it," according to an account by Ferris's company. He pulled in favors and spread his orders among many different companies, at least five from factories in Detroit. Seven train loads of parts for Ferris's first wheel came from Detroit on the Michigan Central Railroad—passing through Ypsilanti's Depot Town—on the way to the World Exposition site on the shore of Lake Michigan in Chicago.

The Ferris Wheel was the hit of the Chicago World's Fair and carried 1,453,611 paying customers with a gross take of $726,805.50.

Ferris's wheel was a complex assemblage of 100,000 parts that ranged in size from small bolts to the giant axle, which at the time of its manufacture by Bethlehem Steel was the largest one-piece casting ever made. Together with its fittings, the axle weighed 142,031 pounds.

"Absolute precision was necessary, as few of the parts could be put together until they were upon the ground and an error of the smallest fraction of an inch might be fatal," said Ferris's promotional announcement at the time.

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can be seen from down in Depot Town

The front towers of the Presbyterian Church were an addition to the earlier narthex and vestibule on North Washington Street. There's a third, shorter, tower at the back of the building. Newcomers often wonder if this Baroque style is the home of Roman Catholics, but there's no cross on the top

The tower of the Methodist Episcopal Church carries the Christian cross, along with a more somber interpretation of Gothic elements

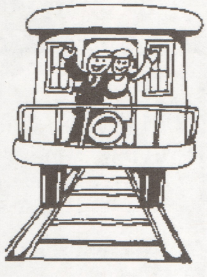
***Residential exclamation points:** Quirk (west side) and Gilbert (east side) families had towers on their palatial homes to complement each other with views between the residences as they looked across the Huron River and Depot Town*

Human monuments don't last very long

• **The Wallendas** - The world famous high-wire act came to several Heritage Festivals, but Ypsi motorcyclists could not find them a motorcycle carburetor that would run upside down.

• **Franzen Brothers' Circus** - Lions and tigers roared on Frog Island and our cats and dogs wouldn't leave the house until the circus had been gone for a week.

• **Various celebrity personalities** - Buffalo Bill, Jenny Lind, Sarah Bernhardt, several U.S Presidents, and lots of Elvii (plural) passed through Ypsi's depot district, but only their reputations remain.



1988 Ypsilanti Heritage Festival poster celebrated a skyline that rivals San Gimignano, Italy

Skyline of San Gimignano, Tuscany

Italian towers: symbols of wealth, power, and paranoia

In northern and central Italy, travelers are often struck by the spindly towers constructed in medieval times, mostly around the 13th century. Sometimes, as in the case of San Gimignano, a small city might, from a distance, look very much like a modern vertical city space—often characterized as a misplaced and ethereal Manhattan.

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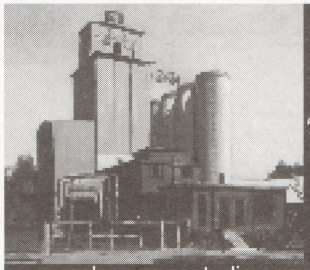
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EMU's Pierce Hall tower

John Davis Pierce, Michigan's first Superintendent of Public Instruction, founded EMU in 1849 as the Michigan Normal School to provide training for teachers. The MNS was the first teacher's college west of the Allegheny Mountains.

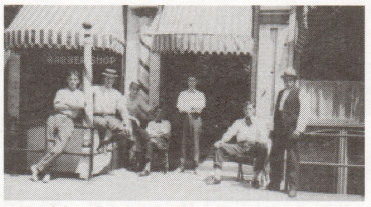
The giant air conditioning units on the roof today do not diminish Pierce Hall's tower at Eastern Michigan University as it still rings out the hour from its chimes.

MCRR depot tower

Not yet a candidate for nomination to greatness:

The squat tower on what is left of the MCRR depot for which our district is named is a replica of the replacement edifice (twice removed?) from the original Victorian depot in Ypsilanti. The temporary wooden scaffolding has been in place for nearly twenty years now.

Oh, Mr. Dahlman, the shame of it all!



In the next *Rag*:

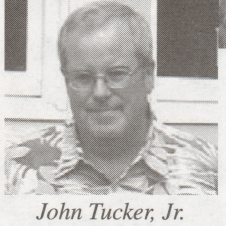
Looking good in the neighborhood: a review of tonsorial parlors and beauty shops, past and present, makes a handy guide for back-to-school haircuts.

Progress: After thirty years of Heritage Hoopla, Ypsi's Depot Town looks pretty much the same as it did before it was historical, thanks to the 1977 Historic District Ordinance and the labor of owners, merchants, and volunteers and the love of its loyal patrons.

All that Heritage Hoopla has been very good for Depot Town.

Ypsilanti's monuments are often on wheels

60th anniversary of Tucker's auto innovations recognized



John Tucker, Jr. owned Tucker's Café here for several years

John Tucker, Jr. helped unveil the design for the sign that will highlight the house where he spent his earliest years in Ypsilanti: his grandfather's home on North Park Street.

Pauletta McKivens came to the June 20 preview of the Preston Tucker marker. She attended Woodruff School and often crossed the street to visit her aunt, Margaret Elizabeth Bloodsaw, who was housekeeper for the Tuckers. "One day she told me of a sad day at work," she remembered, "when Mr. Tucker had just received word that he had lost his case in court."

Depot Town Rag

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Love a fair...

Kitchy promotions continue today

The giant UniRoyal Tire on I-94, just a few miles east of Ypsilanti, helps satisfy our need for giant, plastic attractions

A new look for a big tire—our big flat on the freeway

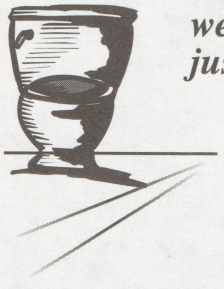
1964-1965: Giant tire is U.S. Royal rubber company's promotional ferris wheel at New York World's Fair. Small pods carried passengers around the tread in its original installation.

1965: World's Fair festivities end. Tire goes to Uniroyal sales office in Allen Park, announcing to Metro Airport arrivals that they have missed Ypsilanti and Detroit is imminent.

1994: Giant tire receives facelift, gets sleeker, more modern look, neon lighting, and more modern hubcaps.

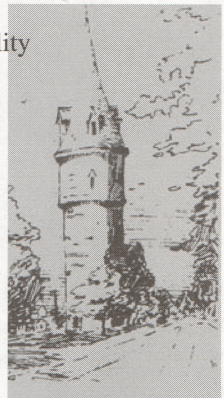
August 1998: Giant tire replicates NailGuard™ tire, with a large nail protruding from the tread, apparently to prove the exhibit's invulerability to criticism.

August 2008: Giant tire still standing, nail removed, reflective paint added.

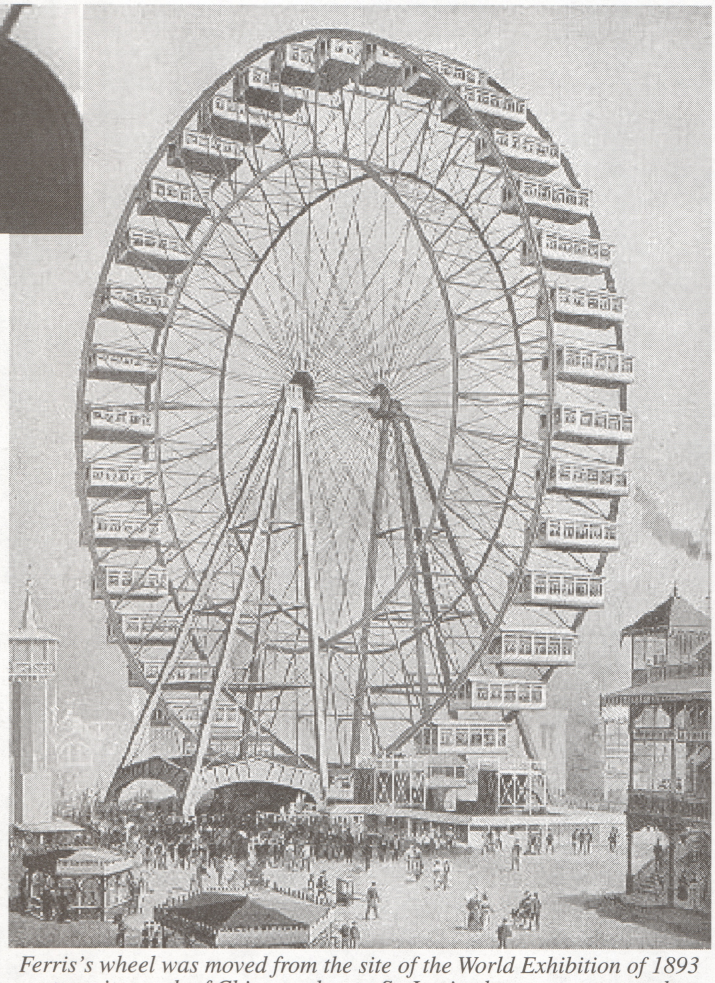


Hey, Sheboygan, we were just wondering:

In 1873, Kohler & Silberzahn plumbing casting company was establihed in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Might they need a similar monument along their highway?



Above: Ypsilanti's famous Water Tower from landscape architect/city planner Olmsted's suggested redesign as a Hansel & Gretel fantasy structure. See the October 2008 Rag for the whole sordid story.



Ferris's wheel was moved from the site of the World Exhibition of 1893 to a site north of Chicago, then to St. Louis, then to a scrap yard

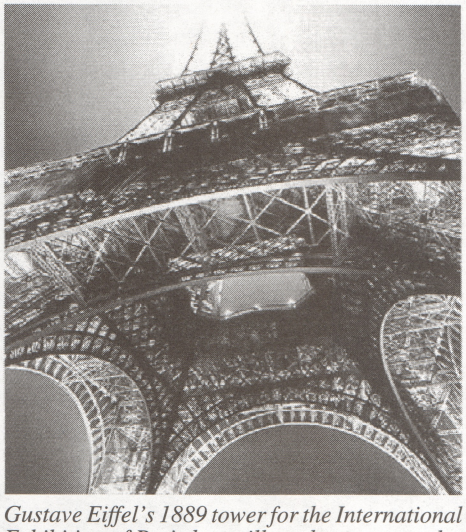
Other notable towers [not in Ypsilanti]

The Tower of Babel, begun on the plain of Shinar, in Babylonia, by the descendants of Noah as a means of reaching heaven (Genesis 11). God prevented its completion by confusing the speech of the people and scattering them throughout the world. The Genesis story was probably inspired by a ziggurat or staged temple-tower in Babylon, seven stories high with a shrine to the god Marduk at its top.

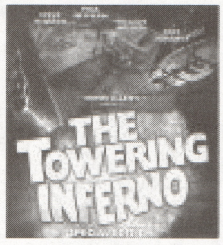
The "Little" Tower of Babel by Pieter Bruegel (c. 1525-69), Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Today's tallest tower: Dubai's Burj at 1,680 feet

Dubai's new (Burj) tower is now the world's largest, a 1680-foot skyscraper, beating out Taipei Taiwan's 1,667 feet record held since 2004. When completed, the skyscraper will feature more than 160 floors, 56 elevators, luxury apartments, boutiques, swimming pools, exclusive corporate suites, Italian fashion designer Giorgio Armani's first hotel, and a 124th floor observation platform.



Gustave Eiffel's 1889 tower for the International Exhibition of Paris has still not been removed



"One Tiny Spark Becomes A Night Of Blazing Suspense: Tag line for the 1974 movie *The Towering Inferno*, starring Steve McQueen, Paul Newman, William Holden, Faye Dunaway, Fred Astaire, and others.

At the opening party of a colossal—but poorly constructed—office building, a massive fire breaks out that threatens to destroy the tower and everyone in it.

Depot Town knows:

Why does history matter?

-Parade, 22 June 2008

Amnesia is as detrimental to society as to an individual. Historian Daniel Boorstin put it very well: "Trying to plan for the future without a sense of the past is like trying to plant cut flowers."

What can we learn from the past?

- That there is no such thing as "a self-made man or woman"—we all are influenced by people around us.
- That every action has consequences, and we have to be very careful about leaping to conclusions from first impressions.
- And that integrity and character do count in the long run.
- The idea that no one has ever lived in more difficult or dangerous times is untrue. Others have weathered more horrendous storms; we can take heart from them.

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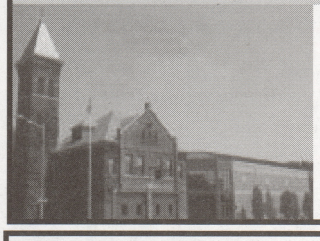

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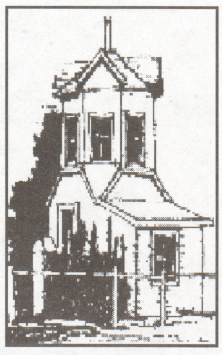
Depot Town's modest Crossing Guard Tower, a replica of an earlier tower on that spot, may not rival any of the grander edifices in Our Town, but it seems to fit the district's style and demeanor



A matter of scale

Depot Town's Crossing Guard Tower is the only fake example in this review of Ypsilanti towers. In 1991 neighborhood volunteers created this replica of an earlier structure on the site in 1890 where it helps balance the block with the collection of notable examples up the hill to the west.

The original tower sheltered a railroad employee whose job it was to lower the gates and keep horses away from the tracks when trains approached.

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